

Opening Address
Senator Michael R. Gibbons, President Pro Tem
First Regular Session, 94th General Assembly
January 3, 2007

Lt. Governor Kinder, Judge Russell, Members of the Missouri Senate, our families, friends, and people of Missouri:

As we take our places in this magnificent chamber, I want to thank you for entrusting this position of leadership to me as we move into a pivotal time in our state's history. I particularly appreciate the support of the Senator from the 5th, who will also continue as our Minority Leader. Working together, we have made improvements to the civility in the Missouri Senate and will continue working together to maintain an environment where the difficult issues we face can be debated vigorously and decisions made with civility and respect.

We welcome back our returning members, and extend a special welcome to our five new members, the newly-elected Senators from Nodaway County, the 12th District; Monroe County, the 18th District; Jefferson County, the 22nd District; Jackson County, the 10th District; and the City of St. Louis, the 4th District. You are joining an institution that has served the people of Missouri for 186 years and is known as the place where complex issues come to find a common sense solution.

It may sound easy, but the issues that really matter generally do not have easy answers. It is a struggle for each of us on our own, and all of us together, to determine what is right and best for the future of all the people we represent.

It should come as no surprise that our work here involves struggle. We come from various backgrounds and beliefs. Each of us represents approximately 165,000 people from very different parts of Missouri, and we have different ideas on how to address the issues we face.

So, why are we here? We come together in this historic chamber to give voice to the hopes and dreams of all the people of Missouri. We were elected so we could rise at our desk, to introduce bills, propose amendments, engage in debate, to offer our ideas on what we believe to be best. When we offer these ideas, we do not offer them for ourselves, but on behalf of the people we represent. As a result, each idea deserves to be heard; although, each idea does not necessarily deserve our support. Support for a proposition must be earned, and the success of the idea is demonstrated by our vote. We debate the idea and a decision is made. This is what the people expect. This is what the people deserve.

In the recent national election, the voters said very clearly that it is time to address serious issues in a serious way. Refusing to address key issues, whether by insisting that we "stay the course," or by the few using legislative maneuvers to prevent action, are wrong, and the people know it.

We are here in a position to make a difference at the dawn of the 21st Century. Our first two years have seen serious work done on the foundation for this future and it is proving to be a good start. More people are working, and the

future looks bright. But there are trouble spots ahead that we must do something about.

Thomas Jefferson in the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence wrote:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,...

Governments in America exist to secure these fundamental rights, and in the Missouri Senate, the voters have entrusted this power to us. Therefore, we need to take bold action where great threats to these unalienable rights are found to protect the people of Missouri. One such threat is to our health. Without the opportunity for good health, our fundamental rights to Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness are diminished or lost. We have already said that the poor deserve better, and set a plan in motion with great urgency to reform our failing Medicaid system. Medicaid began in Missouri in 1968, but it is not 1968 anymore. It is the 21st Century, and a healthcare plan that only provides treatment when sickness or disease attacks is inadequate, dangerous and a direct assault on our unalienable rights. Today, all of us working together, Republicans and Democrats, can boldly enter the future, with a focus on the people rather than on big government, big healthcare providers, and big insurance companies. We can focus on protecting health by concentrating on prevention and wellness in addition to treatment. And this is not just a problem for the poor. We must declare war on the high cost of healthcare. The healthcare marketplace that exists today between big providers, big government and big insurance companies is creating a burden the people cannot carry. More are exposed to being uninsured because neither the people themselves nor their employers can afford the skyrocketing costs. We must return the power over this critical part of life to the people, empowering them with knowledge about quality, cost and results, and focusing on prevention and wellness. We can take the people off of the healthcare conveyor belt and put them back in the driver's seat when it comes to choices and decisions on their health and the health of their families.

Another threat to our fundamental rights are the failing school districts in our state. In a rapidly changing global marketplace where the United States should be the leader in the new knowledge economy, education is the key to success. The future looks bright for those who have a good education. But those who do not, I'm sad to say, will be left behind with only poverty, prison, or an early death to look forward to. Such hopelessness is unacceptable. Failing to make positive changes now is criminal. Moreover, a good education belongs to the person who earned it. No one can take it away.

As we look at the Special Advisory Committee's report on the St. Louis City public schools, and knowing that the state school board will be considering what action to take in response, it has been interesting to see the attacks against a recent appointee to the State School Board. She apparently holds beliefs that the education establishment

opposes. We know what they are against. But what are they for?

Looking at the City of St. Louis Schools, are they in favor of graduating barely one half of the students in the district? Are they pleased that only 1 out of 4 that do graduate go on to some post-high school program? Do they know that, according to the chancellor of the St. Louis Community College, that of those with diplomas that go to his school, many spend up to 18 months in remedial programs just to be able to start their 2-year associate's degree? We are allowing the St. Louis City public schools, which serve a large and very vulnerable population of students, to drive the final nail into the coffins of their futures. This failure is an outrage. Unfortunately, St. Louis is not alone. In fact, 12 other school districts across Missouri are in similar shape. It is an outrage in every failing district in Missouri.

So, what should we be for? We should be for reforms that give the students in failing districts a chance at a world-class education with a focus on academic achievement and accountability for results. We should be open to any solution, any solution, that will improve the opportunities for these students. We hear too much about school boards, administrators, principals, teachers or other employees. Our primary concern must be for the children. We challenge everyone interested in protecting these children to come forward to work with us to find common sense solutions today. A good education is the best hope for a life of liberty in which the people can truly have an opportunity to pursue happiness. We must protect their education and have high expectations for academic achievement in all of our schools, so that nearly every student in Missouri graduates with a diploma that means he or she has mastered the fundamental skills necessary to enter today's world, and that they are ready for the next step.

The students in failing districts need us to act now. Their lives and futures depend on us.

Many other critical issues will come before us this year and we will all, at some time, be challenged to our core on what is the right thing to do. And we will challenge each other and our ideas as we stand here on behalf of our constituents, struggling to take right actions for the future of the people of Missouri. When we come together in session, one of my goals is to have everyone pay more attention to the issues at hand. That means putting down BlackBerrys, cell phones and other distractions, and being prepared to debate the bills before us. Out of respect for the people who elected us, it is the least we can do.

Everyone here worked hard and devoted every ounce of energy to win their election. Millions of dollars and thousands of volunteers helped us win. Millions of dollars and thousands of volunteers worked hard to defeat us. At the end of the day, in each of our Senate Districts, the people chose us and have given us their consent to make decisions, to represent their interests, to secure their rights, and to provide for a hopeful future.

We have a solemn duty to find common sense solutions to the complex issues we face. In this effort we must succeed. Working together we will. It is what the people expect. It is what the people deserve.